

THE ART OF THE MARQUESAS ISLANDS

By Patricia Arrigoni

MARQUESAS ISLANDS, TAHITI AND HER ISLANDS, SOUTH PACIFIC – A growing interest in South Pacific art has recently become evident in the United States. In San Francisco, CA. the newly constructed de Young Museum's permanent collection will have a major emphasis in the art of Africa, Oceania and the Americas. In New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is showing a major collection of 80 objects of sculpture and decorative art which originated from the Marquesas Islands. The exhibit titled, "Adorning the World: Art of the Marquesas Islands," is scheduled to run from May 10, 2005 to January 15, 2006. It features richly embellished articles from sculptures to tapa cloth and everyday household items originating from the 18th and 19th Centuries.

I recently toured French Polynesia and spent several days in the Marquesas which are part of the Society Islands situated around one-thousand miles north of Tahiti. These islands are world famous from the colorful paintings of the French artist, Paul Gauguin, who lived in the Marquesas on the island of Hiva Oa, for the last two years of his life. One can find his grave in a peaceful cemetery on a hill overlooking the sea. Marquesean artists are especially well known for their decorative wood carvings of sacred tiki gods and ancestors. Functional items such as bowls and platters are richly carved as are their stunning hardwood war clubs. These works can be seen on display in fine hotels, shops and museums all through the Society Islands.

Tahitian tattoos also remain a popular art form. In the beginning, each clan had its own motif which was painted on tapa cloth made from the bark of mulberry trees. Tattoos were then etched on human skin, and most Marquesas residents I saw wore permanent geometric tattoos on their bodies.

Another art form is the “pareu” cloth worn by the women as wrap-around skirts or dresses. Local designers have today created brilliantly patterned cloths which are light and airy.

In the past, the Marquesans adorned themselves with ornaments made of ivory, mother-of-pearl, shells and feathers. Many of these superbly crafted items are on exhibit in the Metropolitan exhibit.

We drove two and one-half hours over rough unpaved roads to see some ancient tiki gods carved from stone near the village of Puamau. Discovered some five-hundred years ago, these famous statues are thought to be over a thousand years old.

It was here also that I was able to meet the 62 year old grandson of Paul Gauguin, Tehau Tipahaehae. His mother, Tahiatikaomata, was born to Gauguin and Marie Rose Vaeoho on September 14, 1902. Tipahaehae and his eight year old grandson who had been named after the famous painter, rode on a horse to a beach where I was scheduled to interview them. Young Paul Gauguin had also named his horse, Paul Gauguin.

Tipahaehae explained that he was not an artist but a fisherman and farmer of noni, a health food, and dried coconut called copra. He and his wife, Marieclaire Heita, raised eleven children on Hiva Oa and were happy with their life.

Basket weaving from coconut and pandanus leaves is another Marquesean art form I saw everywhere. Carved and decorated coconuts were also popular, and I viewed several in the gift pavillion of the new Paul Gauguin Cultural Center. This Center, officially called “L’Espace Culturel Paul Gauguin,” houses reproductions of Gauguin’s paintings and information about his life. The center was built next to a replica of the painter’s thatched roof home. Gauguin called it his “House of Pleasure,” and it contained a living space upstairs, and a kitchen and studio where he painted on the first floor.

Gauguin's rock well, next to his "House of Pleasure," not only provided water to drink, but a place to cool his beer and wine. He literally "fished" up his liquid refreshments to the second story of his house with a long bamboo fishing pole.

While Paul Gauguin's art will not be on display at the Metropolitan Art Museum exhibit, it will always be an important part of the artistic heritage of the Marquesas Islands.

IF YOU GO:

TRANSPORTATION: I flew Air Tahiti Nui from Los Angeles to Papeete in an Airbus A340 aircraft which took around 7 hours. The service was excellent. For reservations and fares: (877) 824-4846; www.FLYATN.com. From Papeete I flew Air Tahiti on a twin-engine, jet prop aircraft to the Marquesas in a 42 passenger ATR plane, a 3 ½ hour flight which stopped on the main island, Nuku Hiva. The seats were 2+2 and lunch consisted of a sandwich and pastry. For information: 011-689-86-42-42; Fax: 011-689-86-40-69; www.airtahiti.aero; Email: reservation@airtahiti.pf.

TRANSPORTATION BY SHIP: In 2005 and 2006 the luxurious *MS Paul Gauguin* which tours the Society Islands and the Tuamotu Atolls will also be making trips to the Marquesas Islands. Departure dates from Papeete, Tahiti to the Marquesas in 2005 are: June 21, July 12, November 19 and December 17. Toll Free: 800-285-1835; www.RSSC.com.

LODGING: I stayed at the Hiva Oa Pearl Lodge in a bungalow with a high A-frame ceiling and a wooden roof. The view of the ocean and mountains was stunningly beautiful making me think of Shangri-la.

The bungalow contained a king bed, night stands with lights installed in cuts of bamboo, a long counter under a picture window, wood floor and woven matting on the walls. Amenities included a mini bar, deck with two wooden chairs, white

cotton robe, hair dryer and a supply of bug spray. Rates begin at around \$188. Tel: (689) 927-587; Fax (689); Email: hiva.oa.pearl@mail.pf; www.pearlresorts.com.

EXCEPTIONAL GUIDE – We spent two days with Frida Peterano who drove us around in her four-wheel vehicle over unpaved roads all over Hiva Oa. She spoke English quite well, showed up on time, was cheerful and helpful. Home: 689-927-966; cell: 689-707-202; Fax: 689-927-976